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THE
S T O R Y
OF THE
TRAGEDY OF AGIS.

WITH
OBSERVATIONS on the Play, the
Performance, and the Reception.

Tenet auratum Limen Erynnis.



L O N D O N,
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THE
STORY
OF THE
TRAGEDY OF AGIS.
WITH
OBSERVATIONS, &c.

AGIS, a good king, rules in Sparta. A former sovereign has been deposed for his vices: he is living; and his queen remains in the place.

Amphares, a turbulent and ambitious magistrate, plots with her for the restoration of her lord.

Lyfander is a friend of Agis: he is an Athenian youth; he fights his battles; and is victorious.

Uanthe, an Athenian virgin, in love with Lyfander, has followed him to Sparta.

These are the principal persons.

B

Agis

Agis is acted justly by Mr. Mossop; Lyfander gloriously by Mr. Garrick: there is all the delicacy of the sex in the manner of Mrs. Cibber's playing Uanthe.

Mr. Havard, one of the best men in the world, labours to appear sufficiently the villain.

Mrs. Yates performs the queen of the deposed king: the part is of importance in the story; but not much in the person.

Mrs. Pritchard is the mother of the king. Hr. Holland plays a Thracian, *Rbasus*, who has served in the Spartan armies from a youth; and his brother *Euxus* commands a body of Thracians brought in to answer the purposes of the conspirator.

The play breaths heroism and virtue.

Amphares heightens the distress and trouble of the action, by his Love for Uanthe. His first object is the destruction of Agis; the next of Lyfander; for a double cause, because he is the support of Agis, and he is his rival.

Lyfander wins a battle, but leaves his troops without the city. The commotions of the people



ple threaten Agis ; who directs him to go to them, to be ready on occasion. Love, and obedience to his mistress keep him in the city in disguise ; mean time the gates are shut. There is an army of Thracian mercenaries in the place ; and he cannot get out. While he is speaking with Uanthe, in disguise, Amphares enters, and seizes the lady. Lysander goes out for a sword ; and returning attacks the ravisher. The Thracians support Amphares ; but they will not kill Lysander. Amphares holds his sword to Uanthe's breast, and gives the lover the alternative to yield, or see her die. Lysander yields himself a prisoner.

The captain of his guard is the brother of Rhæsus. Rhæsus attempts to move him, but he is undetermined. Lysander wants to send a messenger to the king, who is in a place of sanctuary : Rhæsus accepts the office ; and he is discovered, and taken.

This determines the brother : he frees Lysander, and joins him. That hero has his usual success : he conquers all opposition ; kills Amphares, and preserves Uanthe : but in the mean time the king, deluded by a stratagem from his retreat, is sacrificed to the vengeance of the party. His funeral honours close the play.

The

The moral is excellent. That the good of our country is the first human duty ; and death should be despised when it comes in opposition.

The plot is well conducted ; and, after the two first acts, is sufficiently full of business.

The characters are properly supported ; and the language is unexceptionable. It is in general majestic, without false pomp : and there are some passages, which would have done honour to the Greeks themselves.---Take this example ! “ Amphares, having decoyed Agis from his retreat in the temple, and finding him, when in his power, disregard his menaces, says to him *You urge your fate* : to which the monarch answers, in three words, I SCORN IT.”

There is the same sublime in this that made the Frenchman immortal. *What should he do ?* says some one to Horatius, when his son was supposed to be flying from three antagonists : the old man answers, DYE. The circumstance has more fury in this last ; but the answer of Agis is as heroic, and as noble.

After our applause of the author, the next is due to the public, and his friends. I have seen more gaudy audiences, but never so judicious.

One

One might have reckoned every man who honours rank by taste, among them: a circle very formidable to a bad author: but whose applause must to a good one be the first of human felicities,

C--- T--- must not be offended that I name him as a patron of genius, and of virtue. He never acted more consistent with his character. Why should the love of patriotism, or the regard to merit, be confined to one scene or subject? It warmed one's heart to see a person of his judgment and known disinterested character conspicuously applaud, nay, begin the applause, where modest worth deserved it.

This is to encourage genius: these are its best supports; and we should cherish the few sparks that glow among our ashes. Advantage is but the second object of him who has true spirit: ambition is his first; and if that can be satisfied, this author feels the perfect pleasure.

It were easy to add to Mr. T---'s a long list of names of those who gave this play a sanction by their patronage: but a pitiful and mercenary world would fancy interested views; and call it flattery.

Among the ladies, better judges than ourselves of what regards the tender passions, the
success

success was absolute. It was easy to read in the countenance of lady D——, perhaps the first judge in our age of theatrical performances, her perfect satisfaction.

In the next box, the heart perfectly joined this testimony: a lady overcome by the tenderness of the scene, fainted.

They say the breast of authors is the cave of envy. I don't know, whether having wrote this pamphlet will give me title to that honourable addition; but if it do, there will be one exception. Nothing could more charm me, than to hear that the earl of B.—, patron and protector of every science, extends his just regard to a man injured at home by the too rigid, though much to be revered and honoured piety of his brother clergy: to see him stamp the bullion with his seal of praise; lead by the hands an unknown friendless and oppressed young man; who had no one recommendation but his merit; procure for him the favour of his prince, and give him that Encouragement, which is all the British want (but which they always want) to raise them to a superiority over the whole world.

The public unanimity on this occasion is more strange. The theatre is a house in which majorities

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ties are common; but I thought the eloquence of a P** alone could breathe into them all one spirit; lead over to the side of Truth those who came determined in the cause of error; and draw her voice from the mixed multitude.

Indeed the sentiments of the play are such as ought to make a strong and universal impression upon Britons: and most at this peculiar juncture.

“ That honour gives the foldier only this choice, victory or death.

“ That kings are born for the good [of their People.

“ That it is happier to perish innocently, than to submit to crimes.

And “ that men never should repent of virtue; though the reward be death.”

The people must be indeed devoted on whom such sentiments have no effect; whom they do not warm and animate, and inspire: but this we had the joy to see is not the state of Britain. The whole people felt their force: those first, in whom such thoughts can be most useful, the higher ranks, the patrons of true worth, and the friends of virtue; but from them the same full glow

glow of satisfaction and applause diffused itself to the less elevated and refined: and if less quick in their susceptibility, they were not less strongly moved. Their eyes, their countenances, confessed the flame; before their hands or voice expressed it: the scene brought into life the power of the Orphæan lyre; when in the Argonautic vessel

*High on the stern the Thracian rais'd his strain,
And Argo saw her kindred trees
Descend from Pelion to the main.*

*Transported demigods stood round,
And men grew heroes at the sound,
Inspir'd with glory's charms.
Each chief his seven-fold shield display'd,
And half unsheath'd the shining blade,
And rocks and seas, and skies resound,
To arms, to arms, to arms!*

These are the emotions tragedy should raise: these are its true effects on a brave people. This is its proper office; and in this it is scarce less honourable than in the first sacred service, the praise of gods.

It was not only in these general sentiments of virtue and of glory, the universal voice of this
British

British audience, worthy of that name, distinguished the due sense of the author's merit, or just conception of the dignity of virtue.

There were particular passages which charmed them. Private vices appeared an object capable of striking them with as strong impressions as public glory.

The Prologue, not one of the usual kind, but something much more proper, and much better, made up in sentiment amply what it might be supposed to want in that pert spirit, which has of late been the character of those appendages to the most serious pieces. The people received it with applauses of the heart, much more to be desired than the idle, hasty, and often rash, noise of hands.

When they who had not read, or perhaps heard before, the rigid Spartan virtue, saw wives and mothers arming the husband and the son for battle; and telling them, that they would rather hear their death than their dishonour, they caught the sacred flame without exception; and there was not a British matron but for the time was such.

I cannot believe the author aimed in any part at personalities; for it is beneath his genius:

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perhaps the Pit made their own application: but something there was said of *men who aimed at enriching themselves in times of general calamity*; and it was felt severely.

Another sentiment that had, though not so suddenly, its effect, was this : *Dangers when necessary ought not to be shunned*. They heard it patiently; but when some one named *Rocheport* from the boxes, the alarm was instant and was universal : the applause was not limited to that of hands, *buzzas* declared the British approbation; and the performance for some time was interrupted.

We owe acknowledgements to the manager of this theatre, for an improvement on the common practice, revived, if not invented of very late time, the introducing harmony to the assistance of sense, and the relief of a too long attention.

This play has shewn a happy effect of it. He has obtained the composition from a master in the old school *; who knows how to preserve the soul and spirit of that manner which rendered Purcell's name so much esteemed; and to soften the roughness of its master-strokes with all-the art of new-born modulation.

The

* Dr. BOYCE.

The symptoms in the first ode are striking, and perfectly new (a praise of no mean rank at this time, when plagiarism is more common in musick even than in writing) and they have yet so much of the old great style, that could a pupil of that Purcell's have been revived, he would have sworn they were his master's.

The other excellence of that great manner was the adapting the sound and measure to the sense. I think in this Purcell, as he never had, never will have his equal : but if his fame be threatened with rivalship, it must be from his hand who gave expression to this and to the other ode.

It has been said, the clergy should not furnish theatres ; and this author has, in an uncommon manner, felt the weight of that unfair prejudice. Far from having reason on its side, the opinion denies the stage the means of its greatest benefit, that of inculcating morality on its most pure principles : for genius in others is too much and too generally tinctured with infidelity : and it precludes those who are most qualified to do it honour.

Why should not the stage become the school of piety, as well as virtue ? It may, without

the too free use of appropriated words claimed by the pulpit. This author shews it may, and he has given a true sublimity to many passages, from the sacred writings, where perhaps few observe the glorious plagiarism.

If any think men less devoted to the Christian doctrines, would give a fairer face to heathen virtue, they err extremely. This play affords full means of confutation. One instance may be named, with which perhaps few others of its kind, in this or any play, could stand in competition.

Lyfander, in his prison, reflects upon the state of man. The author, as this character was pagan, gives him no sentiments but such as suit those principles he must have imbibed in Athens and at Sparta. He doubts, although he hopes, a future state of being. He fears that *man*, as he most beautifully expresses it, *falls like the leaf that shall revive no more*. But his resolution on this uncertain state of thought is the greatest the human mind can entertain,

I will live to-day as if I were immortal.

Many have thought (for to few judges there are many critics) that the genius of Mr. Garrick

rick is more calculated for comedy than tragedy : I don't know whether his friends do not imagine it ; but let those who have entertained that opinion, observe him in this *speech*. It is a very finished one ; and of a peculiar kind. They will not think he excels what he does there, not in the prettiest fooleries of the *Wonder*.

Though it is idle to praise this sovereign of actors, his full fame not admitting augmentation ; it would seem insensibility to speak of the play, and not to have named his conduct in that scene where he resigns his sword to turn from the bosom of his mistress that of the ravisher.

The conflict is violent, and the scene well worked. We do not know which part to expect he will take ; and we are apt to blame him when he chuses to yield himself to certain death, and her into the arms of this bold ruffian. The catastrophe shews he did right ; for on this depends her life, his own, his safety, and the state's : but this we cannot at that time foresee. The distress is therefore the greater : it is not possible, considering all the circumstances, to involve human nature in more. This performer executes and expresses it all : not his looks or gestures only, not the cadence of his voice, but his



his voice itself, broken with anguish, tells us he gives up with his sword all that is worth his his thoughts; even tho' he prevents the immediate death of the beloved Uanthe.

Whatever we want in England, taste for amusements is not one of the articles. Plays are the most instructive: with good regulations they may serve the state; and they will always tend to private improvement. Vice is so common in ordinary life, and so successful, that, were there not the stage, wherein it is represented in it's proper colours, men (for they frequent not churches) might forget even its nature and deformity.

Those who see there is this value in the theatres will not fail to observe, that, to fulfil their use, they must encourage genius. The author no more than the soldier, or the statesman rushes at once perfect into the field wherein he is to shew his excellence: and the public are in all instances equally to raise, improve, and perfect in their servants those talents which may be of use to them.

'Tis thus true genius, thus candour judges: the owls of criticism sleep in the day of splendor and of beauty; but if the brightness fade in any part, the gloom, their proper day-break, wakes them;

them; and ignorant of excellence, they regard only what may be censured. 'Tis thus they beat down with their broad heavy wings the fearful and weak infant merit: more hateful than all human beings, except those who adopt their doctrines.

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